

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 50NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
15 December 1985

Nicaragua's jungle warfare goes high tech

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A grim little war is being fought in Nicaragua with the most sophisticated weapons ever used in Central America. It is a dangerous escalation that threatens to unleash an arms race in some of the smallest and poorest countries in the world—and drag the United States into a military quagmire.

In the last six months, both the Sandinista regime and the CIA-trained rebels fighting to overthrow it have dramatically altered their military strategy.

For the first time in the nearly five-year-old war, the contra rebels have pushed deep into the south from their bases near the Honduran border in an offensive that U.S. analysts say surprised and unsettled the Sandinistas and their Cuban advisers. In response, Managua began to deploy Soviet-made MI-24 Hind helicopter gunships, considered the most effective weapons against insurgents because of their speed, mobility and powerful armaments.

Rebels responded

The helicopter forays against the insurgents were devastating. The rebels began to add sophisticated Soviet-made SAM-7 surface-to-air missiles to their arsenals and began training sessions for 50 men. On Dec. 2, the Nicaraguan Democratic Force, the largest of the rebel armies, fired a SAM-7 and claimed they downed an MI-24 with 14 persons aboard, including the Cuban pilot and co-pilot. (The Sandinistas claimed the downed copter was an MI-8.) It was the first time such missiles had ever been used in the region.

The buildup worries U.S. officials. It prompted national security adviser John Poindexter to undertake a secret two-day mission to the region to assess rebel strength and regional support for the insurgents. He came back convinced that the U.S. should increase aid to the rebels, senior White House officials said.

U.S. military intelligence officers say the Sandinista arsenals now include 110 Soviet-built T-55 tanks, which can outgun any tank in the region with its 100-mm. guns; 30 PT-76 light amphibious tanks, armed with 76-mm. guns and able to ford rivers and maneuver in Nicaragua's difficult terrain, and 200 armored vehicles, mostly BTR-60s and BTR-152s that are armed with machine guns and can carry a squad of infantry.

The Sandinistas also have strengthened their artillery with 24 D-30 Soviet-made 122-mm. howitzers that far surpass the range and firepower of all other artillery in Central America; 24 D-20s; 24 BM-21s, which are capable of launching a barrage of 40 122-mm. rockets for area bombardment, and scores of antitank guns and hundreds of mortars.

But the most awesome buildup has been in the air force: Managua has acquired more than a dozen MI-8 HIP helicopters, a front-line combat chopper that is armed with machine guns

and rocket pods, and eight MI-24 HIND helicopters, considered among the most sophisticated and fastest in the world. They are armed with multiple-barrel machine guns, guided missiles, rocket pods and bombs. They are not vulnerable to small arms fire because of their speed and special armor that can avoid heat-seeking missiles.

The rebels have offered a \$1 million reward to any Nicaraguan pilot who defects with one of the MI-24s.

The Nicaraguan Air Force also boasts two Alouette fighters from France, two Polish-built MI-2 Hoplite cargo helicopters and three AT-33A jets.

U.S. surveillance flights made by high-altitude U.S. Air Force SR-71 Blackbird spy planes have shown Soviet-bloc arms shipments to Nicaragua increasing dramatically since mid-November.

More contra arms, too

The contras also are acquiring sophisticated new hardware. A rebel official acknowledged that the rebels have purchased about "two dozen" SAM-7 missiles from a "third country" and are well stocked with automatic rifles and ammunition. The official said each rebel fighter is going out on patrol with at least 200 to 300 rounds of ammunition.

The rebels also have "significantly increased" their arsenals of mortars and rocket-propelled grenade launchers. They have purchased several high-powered speed boats and are shopping around for light planes to drop cargo and troops deep into Nicaragua.

"This has been a steady but marked escalation on all sides," says a senior U.S. official. "It may prove to be the trip wire for the Sandinistas to get high-powered aircraft, like the Mig-21 or for them to begin shipping SAM-7 missiles to the Salvadoran guerrillas (who are fighting a U.S.-backed government)."

The official said the U.S. also is considering sending F-5 fighters to neighboring Honduras to offset the Sandinista buildup.

"The escalation will most certainly continue without some political movement to defuse the situation—and right now that doesn't seem likely," the official said.